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“‘DAY BY DAY, IN EVERY WAY,
I AM GETTING BETTER AND BETTER.’
AM I?”

A SERMON
BY
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M 18

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WE have here an example of the contagion, perhaps of the potency, of a well-coined and widely heralded phrase. How effective it is for the end for which it was devised, we do not know and do not go into here. We hope it will do for all who take it upon their lips all that is claimed for it. That the mind is the source of much that pours out to devastate and to bless, pollution and purity, has the authority of the most ancient wisdom, as well as the gospels. “Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus,” is one of the earliest Christian injunctions for getting started right and for staying right.

There are two states that we have to consider. There is a state of mind and there is a state of fact. One's state of mind may be the same as the state of fact and it may be different. In the history of human thought the state of mind comes first; is very persistent and deceptive, and usually it has been wrong. The difference between the most ignorant person in the world and the wisest person is just this difference: in the one, the most ignorant, the state of mind is most widely different from the state of fact, and, in the other, the wisest, the two are more nearly the same. On some matters, now, which are

very well known, the state of mind approaches very near the state of fact. That is, one's mind about some things may be as things are. When the state of mind is the state of fact, that is truth; when the state of mind is different from the state of fact, that is error.

Anyone, upon any subject that confronts a human life, has to keep this always in mind, that human history is full of states of mind that shook men with fear and lifted them in ecstasy, yet both equally false. A state of mind, just because it is a state of mind, carries nothing of authority and may be, has been in thousands of cases, a treacherous, deceptive thing, because it is not one with things and the God of things as they are. It is a state of mind, but, it is not a state of fact, and the powers of the universe are finally with the state of fact. The state of mind, sooner or later, must acknowledge its sovereignty and call it lord and master.

This phrase, "Day by day, in every way, I am getting better and better," comes from this most persistent need of the world, to make it come true that, "Whereas I was sick I am now well."

With one's own body it would seem now that someone ought to be able to tell him, with considerable certainty, whether he is better or worse than he was a year ago or ten years ago. But, even here, there is no unanimity of counsel or pronounce-

ment. On one hand those who honestly would like to know whether they are getting better and better, are urged to believe that they ought to beware of the state of mind that everything with them is right and full of health, for, this state of mind is often deceptive. We read every week a whole page setting forth what a great institute is now prepared to do for us at a very small cost. It has the weight of names that inspire confidence and purports to have real human interest in our bodily condition. Here we are warned that this state of mind, that there is nothing the matter with us, is just the condition which results today in much harm. While we are saying that, they urge us to believe, the state of fact is widely different. In the years in which we are saying that, there are points of weakness becoming evident within us. Incipient ailments, which now can be seen and remedied, if taken early, are getting a good start, and beyond remedy, at the very time that our state of mind is carrying us along in the confidence that we are in full health. They stress this, that we ought rather to distrust our state of mind and let them, or some other competent person, look us through and through to see whether we are functioning properly or beginning to break at some point. Then, on the other hand, our world is loud with other counselors who seem equally interested in our bodily well being, and we go to them to see if we are, "Day

by day, in every way, getting better and better." They tell us, with amazing certainty, that this state of mind is about the whole matter, and, if we think we are getting better and better, that is the very thing that makes it true; that the state of mind is very potent, all potent, to make the state of fact, and, that what we get our minds to think, that the fact will be.

We are just pointing out, that, even in this matter of our own bodies, about which there has been the most marvelous increase in human knowledge, in a field which is largely material, operating under well known laws of chemistry and physics, it is difficult, even here, for the wayfaring man, though a very wise man, to know today whom he ought to believe about his own bodily condition.

If it is difficult to know in this field, whether it is well with one or not, whether it is better with him than it was five years ago, how difficult it must be to discover, with any certainty, in this other field of man's mind and spirit, where, not the bulk but the quality of life is found; how difficult it must be here for one to determine whether he is in truth getting better and better.

If it were possible; if men could believe with certainty that there are such, most people would like to have someone look them through and through periodically and say to them, "You are slipping.

The last time we looked into your life you were here, and now you have dropped back to here." Or, to be able to say, "You are in truth getting on. You are more of a man, more of a woman, by the highest tests, than you were a year ago." It might be humiliating, and again it might cheer us mightily to be told just how it is with us, but, whether brought to the dust or lifted high, nothing would serve us so much as to have some one say truthfully just where we are with respect to an earlier stage, and, just where we are with respect to some high, authoritative and acknowledged standard.

We can understand what this must mean to people who have an institution, or an order of men, to tell them which way they are going, backward or forward, and their rate of going, and, about that at which, in general human experience, they will arrive, going the way they are going. We doubt not that the state of fact is that all the people about us are breaking down, or they are building up. This goes on over a long time, until it is evident to all about them, yet, it is a fact, that anyone can verify in his own experience with people, that a life can be breaking down, and slipping back, over a period of years and the life itself never be conscious of it even in the last stages when it is painfully evident to all. One's mind about himself is strangely untrustworthy. It must be true, that, as one himself disintegrates, his own critical faculty for judging

himself, breaks up at the same time. It is not uncommon to see those quite far-spent and broken who are quite unconscious of it all, and cheerfully confident that they are getting on. We believe that a study of breaking lives would reveal this as a law of decline and a rather constant symptom. Now, if one just could be told that by someone who could look him over, and put this true condition of his life down before him on a chart as something to gauge by, just as his temperature, blood pressure, and blood tests are set before him, that would be the highest possible human service.

We suppose that some such wish to serve this greatest human need was in the mind of the church when it established the practice of looking men through and through periodically and of telling them just where they are and just what they should do. Not long ago most people did believe that the church could do just this thing. It was thought to be backed by divine sanctions, and to have authority to do this, and to be the gatherer-up of all human experience in this matter of judging whether people are slipping or not. It told people just this with brutal frankness or with fatherly solicitude, and what they ought to do to get upon their feet again and headed in the right direction. All we are noting here is, that, whatever its subsequent history and the net result of the practice, it grew up, no doubt, to meet just this need of which we are speaking to-

day, to have someone tell us honestly just where we are.

But all this is a matter of evidence which is beside our present purpose. All we are recalling here is that the church no longer commands this confidence. An increasing number believe that there is no institution or body of men competent to give such a true judgment. The church still performs this office for a large company of people who believe in it, but, as soon as one ceases to believe in it, then this service is lost to him. We are speaking now of those who have lost this confidence and are left with no one in the world, recognized as competent to give them a true judgment about their life, as institutions now do about their bodies.

Everyone now is thrown back upon his own judgment about himself. He is his own guide. No one now is recognized generally as having the right, or the insight, to tell another when he is slipping or getting on. It is only by chance that one in his whole lifetime will chance upon someone who will perform for him this office. It might be a friend; it might be a business associate. It might be a physician or someone in the church with which he is affiliated. At any rate it is only by the merest chance that one will find any one who will do for him, now, this office of giving him a true judgment which the church, not long ago, did officially for about all people.

Again, we now not only have no one to judge us, but also we are not quite sure of the standards by which we should judge ourselves. For example, we can recall lives we have watched break down over a period of five or ten years, rather rapid deterioration. Not only were they wholly unconscious of this disintegration, but, on the contrary, they were quite conscious that they were making rapid progress of a very superior and unusual kind. While the very fabric of their lives was decaying, they, in their own state of mind, were growing into the very liberty of the children of God. That is, they had lost not only an institution and a person to measure them and judge them, but also, they had lost the standard by which to judge themselves. With this result, that the state of mind was that they were getting better and better every day, while the state of fact was that they were breaking down.

It is now quite easily possible to become a moral wreck in fact, while one, in his own mind, is one of the first fruits of a new race of superior persons of a new and higher morality. So deceptive is this state of mind about the state of one's own life, that we venture that if we had a laboratory test and count of the great moral failures today, those who have become burdensome to themselves and a menace to all, it would be found that their state of mind, even in their degradation, is that they are a superior order of persons of an advanced code of morality.

So deceptive is the disintegrating mind to pass a true judgment upon its own disintegrating life.

Let us get a little nearer the matter, as to something of immediate concern to ourselves. We suppose that it is a hard fact of life that what we call a person can grow from more to more and from strength to strength. We suppose that this is just as reckonable as computing a chemical reaction or measuring the distance of a star. We mean the building of that which is, in very truth, the very something which makes the individual personality with all that carries with it. It is something that really is that person, which remains, and can be recognized, though the life be stripped bare of all its surroundings and stand naked to the blasts of every misfortune. It is this by which one has to judge whether he is getting on day by day, this which is made by no item of his surroundings and cannot be touched though all his surroundings change and are replaced by those most unfavorable. One has to strip off several layers of externals to get down to this to see if he is more or less than five years ago.

It is something which is very nigh thee, even in thine own heart and mind, but, one has to look into it to see whether he is really getting on. It is very nigh thee, so nigh that even one's own body of flesh is external to it and but the packing in which the

real treasure is wrapped. That is, one may be in better health; may weigh more; may have a better and more beautiful body than five years ago, yet, this is no guarantee, and says nothing about whether that which we call a person's life is getting better and better. It is a great help, the body is a noble and effective instrument to lift life by, but, this itself says nothing about whether what we call the life is getting better and better. Hosts of people in every generation, have broken down through the very years when they were fashioning their bodies into the most effective instruments of strength and comeliness. That which must have grown is more nigh thee than even the very flesh, which, after all, can waste or build without touching the very life of us.

Let us go another step. One may have computed his gain from some other external, even more external, and less himself, than his own body. One of these other shells with which we surround ourselves may be better, and much better, than ten years ago, but, again, this is not really our life. The next layer of our life, our clothes, may have grown better and better and it is easy to think that we have grown accordingly, but, here again, this says nothing about whether we have gained or lost. This of itself does not change us more or less, than the rack is changed upon which we hang our clothes. Thoreau did admonish us that every time we put on

new clothes it should be a symbolical and a sacramental act, and that we ought to renew our lives at the same time to the same degree that we have made over or renewed our clothes. But, in human experience this itself is no guarantee of our improvement. It is very common in human experience to have the very years in which clothes and adornment grew most rapidly from more to more, and better, the very years when the very life itself, decreased in as great degree as the clothes increased.

Again, to go to still more outward layers, to all that circle of acquaintances and friends that we make and use to further our ends, all the things we join and all the people with whom we connect, giving us the feeling that now we are really getting on, these again are no guarantee. The very years in which most connections are made may be the very years, as we know ourselves, when we did not, in truth, get better and better in that which is the very life of us.

This is enough to carry what we have in mind and to indicate how easy it is to measure by something that is not the very person, the I of us, our very self.

It is very nigh thee, even in thine own mind and heart. It is the growth of that which one could take with him if he were stripped of all distinctions, of name, family, clothes, home, connections and

reputation. It is this which one would take with him if a whole company of people were banished suddenly to a far away island in the midst of the sea, all garbed alike, with all distinctions removed and forgotten, so that one had to stand on the rock bottom quality of his own inner being, whatever it is. That is the thing we have in mind. Has that grown? Has one's very being, the very quality and strength of his innermost being, has that grown? In this desert place where one had to stand on that alone, what would he have of his very self to enrich that company when shorn of all those externals upon which he had depended and had rated his getting on? It is very, very nigh thee. Just as nigh thee as this which is left when all is taken away that can be taken away, and often is taken away, from a man, a family, nation or a whole section of the world, in the briefest space of time.

We have wished to indicate something of the searching, penetrating kind of wisdom and insight that it takes to be able to say how it is, in fact, with a life, because it is so nigh thee and so intangible. And we have wished to indicate what responsibility we have taken upon ourselves, now, that we do judge ourselves; now that each has become his own father confessor, with no one to pass upon him whose judgment he trusts as final. We have wished to indicate how searching our own self-judgment has to be if it is to be of any worth

whatsoever, and how easy it is to gauge our getting on by that which is not ourselves at all.

This is the way of human responsibility, for each to come to be himself the judge throughout the whole jurisdiction of his life, with such chance help from friend or human fellow as he may meet along the way. We doubt not that this must be always the way of human responsibility, and that it must be always a perilous way. It has its superlatively fine first-fruits, and it has its high mortality of those who cannot, do not, and will not give a true judgment about themselves to themselves.

We are just pointing out that the church and orders of men did do this for about all men not long ago; told them just where they were with respect to their fellows and their God. Too, we are just pointing out that, now, that each has become his own high priest in judgment upon himself, it is very possible, and quite easy, to make mistakes; to mislead and to deceive himself in passing judgment upon himself.

As a church we have been leaders in this, and, it is for us to know the gravity of the thing that we have done for ourselves, and for us to know just what it means, and how much it means, to encourage others to enter upon this perilous, but still inevitable and fruitful way of each saying for himself how it is with him; each asking and answering his own question, "Is it well with me?"

